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# Mark Pittaway, The Worker´s State

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## REFERENCES

Mark PITTAWAY, **The Worker´s State. Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944-1958**. Pittsburgh : Pittsburgh University Press, 2012, 386 p.

1 Mark Pittaway uses "the worker's state" ironically, much as Miklós Haraszti did in a similarly titled book, to underscore feelings of alienation and powerlessness among socialist Hungary's industrial workers.[1] But unlike Haraszti's slim volume, a sociographic account of his own experience working at Budapest's Red Star Tractor Factory in the early 1970s, Pittaway's is squarely in the tradition of the "new" labor history that arose in Great Britain in the 1970s and spread therefrom to the rest of Europe and North America. That tradition stressed the labor process as key to understanding how industrial capitalism's relentless search for additional sources of surplus value limited the sense of community among industrial workers. It reached its apogee in the 1980s and 1990s just as deindustrialization was rapidly disappearing the Western industrial working class. Although it accommodated a few studies that analyzed trajectories of labor relations in the Communist East, Pittaway's is the most painstakingly researched and detailed, a veritable warehouse of information on and insight into the tempestuous relations between Hungary's industrial workers and political authorities ruling in their name.[2]

2 Instead of a case study that would have given depth at the expense of breadth or a generalized approach drawing on examples from across industries and regions, he anchored his study around three very different industrial communities: Újpest, a working-class town absorbed within Budapest in 1950 and containing textile, shoemaking, furniture, and electrical goods factories; the cluster of coal mining villages, a cement factory, and power plants to the west of Budapest that made up Tatabánya; and the Zala oilfields located in an economically poor rural area along Hungary's southwestern border with Yugoslavia. Each of these communities had its

own socio-economic specificities and hence political ecology. Each exhibited its own internal tensions –between skilled "older" workers and "new" unskilled ones, for example. Yet, despite their differences, the relationship of workers to the putative worker's state followed the same arc.

3 It started with the gap between the "liberation" that the Left promoted as "the founding myth of... Hungary's socialist state" (25) and workers' predominant experience of "violence, fear, penury, and chronic insecurity." (25) It continued through the late 1940s and into the early 1950s when the elimination of the Communists' rivals for political power and the introduction of labor competition schemes (piece rates, Stakhanovism) to increase productivity provoked "fury" among many workers. Indeed, fury –sometimes modified as "silent" (128, 137, 151 twice), sometimes substituted by "intense frustration" (71), "fear and resentment" (96), and "hysteria" (141, 149)– appears again and again in these pages. The fury could be directed by some workers against others, for example, when new recruits were introduced into the mines in large numbers in 1951 or when Stakhanovites "exploited hierarchies of bargaining" (160), but more often the Hungarian Workers Party (MDP), the State Security Agency (AVH), and above all the "chaotic" (another favorite term) production system were the targets.

4 During the New Course of 1953-1955 penury abated at least for some – senior male workers who made private arrangements with lower-level management to get the best assignments, and the smallholding workers of Zala who did very nicely selling produce in private markets. But these gains only intensified the fury among other segments of the working class that did not experience them. And when elements within the party decided to rein in the reforms, fury turned into full-blown revolution. Undergirding Pittaway's analysis is the concept of legitimacy. Initially, the Communist dictatorship enjoyed it at least among "the left-wing majority of workers in Újpest" (100), and it was "cemented" by promise of higher earnings via lax production targets. But already by 1950, workers at Tatabánya "had given voice to the root of the collapse of the legitimacy of the regime" (137) by opposing contributions to a "peace loan." The "legitimacy gap" (148), fed by workers' disappointment, occasional repression but more often ineffectualness on the part of the regime, grew thereafter. By 1955 that gap had turned into an "outright political crisis of authority for the regime" (186), and nothing it did could overcome the "severe credibility deficit." (217)

5 Pittaway provides a masterful account of working-class participation in the 1956 revolution and its aftermath. His ground-level view gives the reader a keen appreciation for the variety of economic and political positions taken by the workers' councils and the territorial revolutionary committees of Újpest, the key role of the bus drivers' strike in catalyzing workers in the dispersed communities that made up Tatabánya, and the "violent explosions of anger" and "festering fury" (229) in the worker-peasant communities in Southern Zala. Remarkably, though Soviet intervention crushed the revolution, it also ushered forth János Kádár's "politics of conciliation" that "provided the basis for the generation of a brittle and conditional legitimacy for the regime among urban workers," and even to a degree the rural-based oil workers (233).

6 Masterful though the book is in this and other ways, it is also not an easy reading. Its relentless emphasis on the workplace as the site where class happens militates against others. There is no room for sports or music, children do not appear once, and neither

does humor. Mark Pittaway died suddenly and tragically young shortly after submitting the manuscript that became this book. Had he survived long enough to see the project through to publication, he may not have been persuaded to incorporate these other dimensions of working-class life, but he might have winnowed some of the detail that obscures rather than enhances the points he wanted to make, insisted upon some illustrations, fashioned a better index than the one included, and avoided leaden sentences as well as those containing mixed metaphors. The University of Pittsburgh Press is to be thanked for proceeding with the publication of *The Workers' State* in the absence of its author, but Mark Pittaway –and his readers– deserved a more assiduous editing job.

## NOTES

**1.** Miklós Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State*, New York: Universal Books, 1978.

**2.** The closest analogy is Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).